

Volunteers in the Courts News

Spring 2005

Volunteers helping inmates and their families

A young man living in Milwaukee is babysitting two young children when one boy finds the man's gun hidden between two mattresses. The boy accidentally shoots the other boy, killing him.

The young man, who is full of remorse, is sentenced to five years in prison. He has a 4-year-old daughter who cannot visit and he is losing touch with her. He is depressed and does not know where to turn.

Community Connections, spearheaded by Dick Verhagen when he was warden at Oakhill Correctional Institution (OCI) and Volunteer Coordinator Donna Mahr, was created to help inmates such as this young man. The volunteer program provides inmates with emotional support, gives them positive ways to interact with their families, including instruction on how to read, and readies them to return to the community before being released from OCI, a minimum-security prison for men in Oregon, Wis.

The young man took advantage of the many programs offered through Community Connections and was able to get to know most of the volunteers and comfortable enough to discuss his fears and concerns. The volunteers helped him understand his feelings of guilt and depression. "He was willing to learn and was very open," said Volunteer Sarah Quinn.

One of his favorite activities was making videotapes to send to his daughter in Milwaukee, where he always read a book and sometimes he sang to her. Creating the tapes enabled him to act somewhat fatherly and to keep in touch with her. A volunteer does the videotaping and the videotapes are supplied through local donations. Inmates are charged \$2 for each tape they create.

Before his release from OCI, the young man, now 23, took a discipline class, Parenting with Love and Logic. He now lives in Milwaukee with his girlfriend and daughter.

In addition to Parenting with Love and Logic, the well-known and acclaimed program for effective discipline, a variety of other classes are offered. Fatherworks, a parenting class where inmates discuss their relationship with their own fathers; Fatheread, a literacy class that uses children's books to teach the men to read; and a class where the men learn how to reconnect with their families before and after being released. Most classes run for eight weeks and are offered two to four times per year.

The Family Center is the where inmates can attend informal classes or write letters to their families. It's also the heart of the program. Most of the volunteers work in the Family Center, helping inmates choose books to read to their children or discussing their problems. The center is open Tuesdays and Wednesdays for two hours at a time.

Community Connections also works to create a positive atmosphere for the inmates' families when they come to visit at OCI and provide children's activities to facilitate interaction between inmates and their children. There are approximately 25 volunteers working with the more than 600 inmates at OCI in this program. The volunteers have diverse backgrounds, and include professors, social workers, and students from Edgewood College, UW-Madison, and UW-Whitewater.

Volunteers are needed for creating visiting room activities, teaching classes, acting as a resource for the children and their families, mentoring, and more. Volunteers choose the number of hours they will work; current volunteers work anywhere from two to 12 hours per week. They must be at least 18 years old, participate in a two-hour orientation provided by OCI, and pass a background check.

Volunteers also help by assisting inmates who are nearing their release dates with research on topics such as housing to facilitate their smooth reintegration into the community. Volunteers who are uncomfortable working directly with the inmates might choose to assist with research-related tasks.

While Community Connections does not have a formal system for tracking the success of these inmates once they are released, doctoral students from UW-Madison are beginning to track participants in the mentoring program that was started in December 2004 to assist inmates during the transition back to the community. In this program, volunteer mentors stay in touch with the former inmates for up to 18 months after their release. Plans are in place to track the success of the constellation of other activities, classes, and support groups with the help of UW students.

Funding for the program is provided through private donations. “Truly, we don’t have much of a budget,” Mahr said, “since we get books from garage sales and the local cable company donates their time to film and make videos [to send to inmates’ children], there isn’t much being spent.” The program has an inmate who does most of the secretarial work and OCI provides substantial assistance in a variety of ways. In other words, everyone contributes.

“Our program receives tremendous support from Oakhill and Jack Rice [education coordinator],” Quinn said. “We couldn’t ask for more.”

For more information on Community Connections or to learn more about volunteering, contact Sarah Quinn at (608) 218-1204 or sarah@communityconnectionswi.org or visit the Web site at <http://communityconnectionswi.org>.